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USSR: Pravda's editorial on the 90th anniversary of Stalin's birth could have current political implications.

The editorial is the first formal commemoration of the dead dictator's birth since 1959, and reaffirms the "balanced" approach to Stalin adopted at the 20th party congress in 1956. It notes that it was while Stalin was the Communist Party's secretary that the USSR's socioeconomic transformation took place and victory over Germany was achieved. It also praises Stalin for his part in the struggle against opposition elements within the Communist Party. It then charges Stalin with theoretical and political errors "which became chronic in the last period of his life" and comments that though errors connected with the "personality cult" were harmful, the party has already corrected these mistakes.

The commentary is one of the more restrained accounts of Stalin's role to appear in the Soviet press during the last few years. The criticism of the last years of Stalin's life, while not new, might still affect some of the USSR's present rulers. They, as well as Stalin, bear a measure of responsibility for decisions reached then in Moscow--decisions that have had a great bearing on major unsolved questions troubling the Soviet leadership today.

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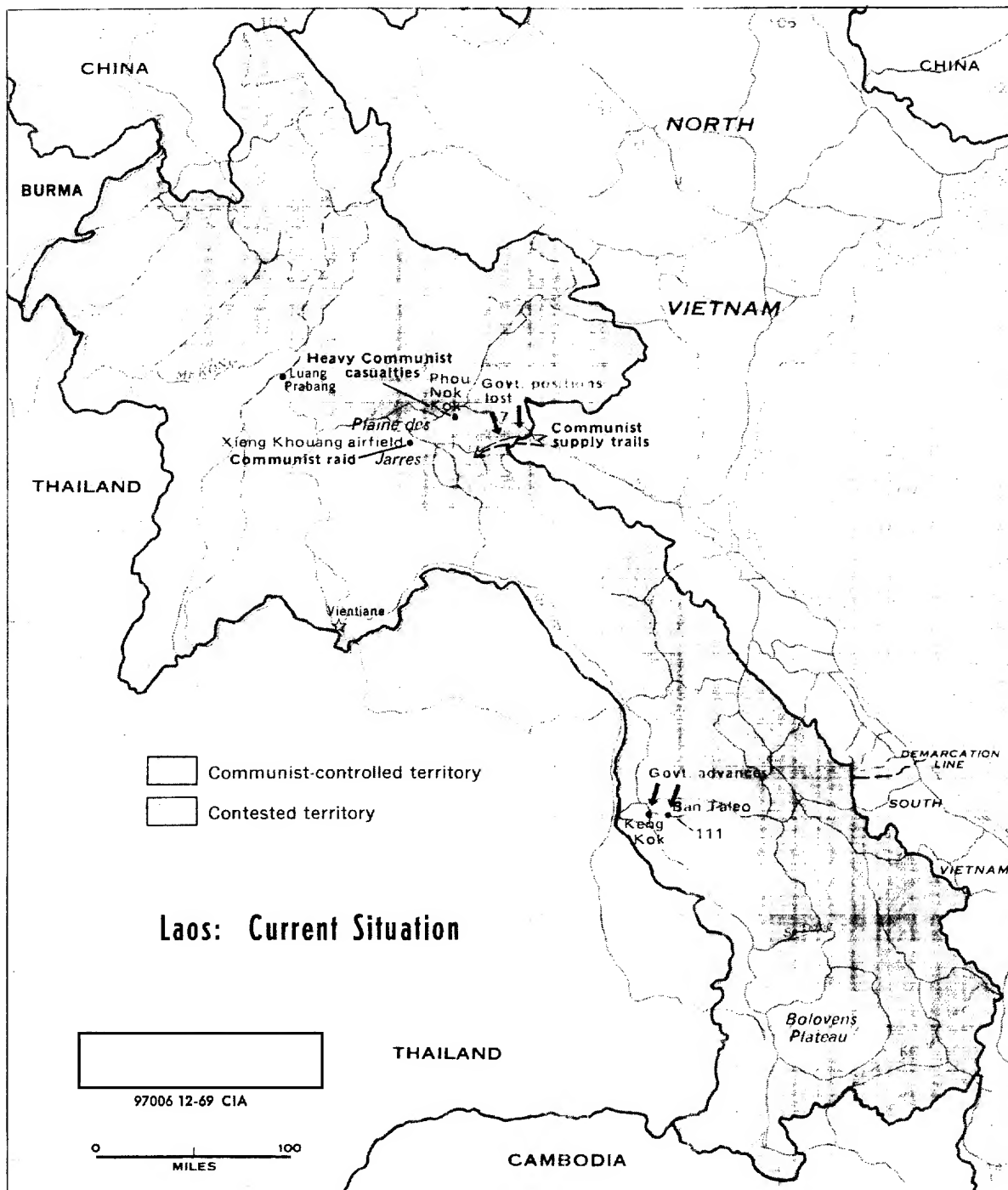
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Laos: Current Situation

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Laos: There has been little change in the military situation, but casualties continue to mount on both sides.

A recent increase in Communist military activity is highlighted by a North Vietnamese commando raid on 18 December against Xieng Khouang airfield, an important government support base on the Plaine des Jarres. Although the position was held, the government paid a high price, suffering 43 killed.

The Communists also are stepping up their efforts to secure their supply lines, which have been under steady ground and aerial harassment since early September. In recent days, government guerrillas have been pushed out of a number of positions astride an important network of Communist supply trails in eastern Xieng Khouang Province. In the Route 7 area northeast of the Plaine, however, the Communists have had less success. On 19 December, a North Vietnamese force lost over 40 killed in an attempt to clear government troops from the area. The importance the enemy attaches to securing this area is underscored by the fact that within a two-month period well over 500 North Vietnamese troops have been killed attempting to overrun Phou Nok Kok, a strategic highpoint overlooking Route 7.

In the south, government guerrillas in recent days have reoccupied several key positions near Route 111. These limited gains should ease the pressure farther west where less aggressive government units have been attempting to blunt a Communist threat to Ban Taleo and Keng Kok.

(Map)

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South Vietnam: An apparent government attempt to force the ouster of three deputies from the Lower House through a disruptive demonstration may well backfire.

An estimated 1,000 demonstrators marched on the Lower House on 20 December and demanded the ouster of three members accused of pro-Communist activities. About 100 broke into the chamber while an interpellation of the finance minister was in progress, interrupted the session with anti-Communist and anti-neutralist harangues, and caused some property damage. Subsequently, several deputies took the floor to accuse the government of inspiring the demonstration, while others expressed similar views privately to US officials.

There is some evidence that the government had a hand in the demonstration. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Thieu has encouraged some civil servants, political figures, and military officers to promote such activities. Press reports indicate that some of the participants were paid to march and that the few police on hand made only half-hearted attempts to curb the disruption.

In a related event on 21 December, a few thousand northern Catholic refugees from nearby villages marched through Bien Hoa city just north of Saigon and demanded the removal of the three deputies. This demonstration, however, was orderly throughout.

These incidents, particularly the disruption on the 20th, probably will rekindle Lower House resentment toward the executive and complicate Thieu's efforts to smooth working relations between the two branches of government. [REDACTED]

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Uganda: The country is calm following the attempt on Friday evening to assassinate President Milton Obote.

The President is reportedly recovering from gunshot wounds inflicted as he was leaving the annual convention of the ruling Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC). Although a state of emergency has been declared and tight security measures have been imposed, some minor event could serve to spark serious incidents.

There is as yet no information regarding the assassin. An attempt on Obote's life is not surprising, however, because he has many bitter enemies. The recent successful assassinations in neighboring Kenya and nearby Somalia no doubt provided encouraging examples for the President's opponents.

After the assassination attempt, the government banned all formal opposition parties, which hold only eight of 77 parliamentary seats, but did not try to implicate them in the attempt. At the UPC convention prior to the shooting, the delegates had called for the President to dissolve the opposition parties; there had been earlier indications that Obote's advisers wished no opposition during the elections planned within the next 18 months.

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Libya: The Libyan negotiator of the US evacuation of Wheelus Airbase wants the transfer period to begin by 1 June 1970 and to be concluded within the month. Many details of the phaseout remain unsettled, but the negotiators expect to meet again on Tuesday for final talks leading to signature of an agreement before Christmas. Libyan leader Qaddafi would probably prefer to be present at the conclusion of the agreement. His participation in the Arab summit meeting in Rabat, however, and the announced visit to Libya of both Nasir and Numayari of Sudan at the end of the summit, may cause the Libyans to delay until these leaders are able to attend the signing ceremonies.

* * * *

Guatemala: The series of terrorist attacks that began on 12 December continues unchecked. Widespread arson in downtown Guatemala City on Friday caused damage estimated at several million dollars. The terrorism appears to relate to Communist plans to disrupt the general elections scheduled for 1 March. Discontent with the government's ineffective response is likely to encourage plotting for a military takeover. The Mendez government, which is trying to ensure free elections and a normal succession period, has so far resisted declaring a state of siege that would prohibit political activity.

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